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SUBJECT: YOUNGER GVN OFFICIALS ON NATIONAL SECURITY

REF: 03 Hanoi 3350

1. (SBU) Summary: During a recent seminar on Vietnam's national security, younger generation officials from a range of GVN agencies and the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) variously commented that: China and the U.S. both represent serious, but completely different threats for Vietnam's future; September 11 changed the world's perspective on terrorism and international security; the U.S. war on terror should be supported as long as it does not become a pretext for other unrelated actions; the war in Iraq might have been mostly a U.S. oil-grab (although some felt the U.S. action was necessary); drugs and corruption seriously threaten Vietnam's internal security; and Burma represents an urgent challenge for ASEAN. The opinions of the participants, while not necessarily indicative of official GVN policy, at least illustrate the thinking of some up-and-coming figures in Vietnam's security and foreign policy agencies. End summary.

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THE COURSE AND THE PARTICIPANTS  
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2. (SBU) The Institute for International Relations of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) recently organized a six-week seminar, sponsored by the Ford Foundation, for thirty younger Vietnamese officials to examine various security issues; unusually, IIR agreed to invite POL FSN to participate as well. The course was designed to introduce the students to the questions that receive attention on the international security agenda, and to examine how these issues affect regional and national security. Most of the students were in their late twenties, with approximately five years of professional experience, and they came from a wide range of government ministries and agencies, including MFA, Defense (MOD), Trade (MOT), Interior (MOI), the CPV's Commission for External Relations and its Ho Chi Minh Political Academy, Vietnam News Agency (VNA), the Voice of Vietnam, the Office of the National Assembly, the Prime Minister's Office, and the North American Studies Center.

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EXTERNAL THREATS TO SECURITY  
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3. (SBU) Participants generally agreed that Vietnam views both China and the U.S. as "superpower" threats; the China threat is to Vietnam's immediate physical security and integrity while the U.S. threat is to Vietnam's political system. An MFA participant noted that China had always maintained a "two-sided" policy with Vietnam; Vietnam needs to exercise "absolute caution" towards China and work out contingency plans for countermeasures in the face of a potential action. He noted the difference between words and actions in China's Vietnam policy; despite statements encouraging Vietnam's development, China had tried to restrain Vietnam's economic and military power out of "fear" of Vietnam's increased ability to occupy more islands in the Spratlys. Many agreed that it was "very difficult" for Vietnam to speak ill of a big neighbor such as China, and that Vietnam should instead "pretend" that Vietnam and China were close friends. They felt that openly expressing Vietnam's distrust of China would be a mistake.

4. (SBU) China had agreed to resolve issues related to the East Sea via peaceful means, one MFA participant further noted, while continuing "a policy of "nibbling" or "erosion," i.e., steadily occupying small pieces of territory in the Spratlys. China had publicly committed to resolve the issue multilaterally, but still acted unilaterally, he asserted. Many participants agreed that China was "unpredictable." Some labeled China's tactics on border and territorial issues as an "aim east, hit west" policy -- using diversions to convince an opponent to defend against attacks in the wrong place, or acting opposite to specifically stated intentions. One example was China's military and oil exploration activities in the Tu Chinh and Dai Hung areas, despite China's explicit statements of preference for joint exploration and the maintenance of the status quo. Military modernization was therefore important for Vietnam, a MOD participant said, including a need to

strengthen Vietnam's military and naval counterattack capacity.

15. (SBU) Several course participants noted that the U.S. represented a long-term threat to Vietnam's political system, especially via "peaceful evolution," citing the Montagnards in the Central Highlands, the Protestants in the Northwest, and the possible establishment of an independent state by the Cham as alleged tactics supported by the Americans. Fear of "peaceful evolution" led the GVN to levy harsher punishment on political activists than on criminals, noted an MOI participant, pointing to heavy sentences in 2003 on Pham Hong Son and Nguyen Vu Binh for "espionage."

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INTERNATIONAL SECURITY AFTER 9/11  
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16. (SBU) There was a consensus that 9/11 was a turning point not only for U.S. foreign policy but also in creating a "profound change" in overall views on terrorism. Participants noted that countries in Southeast Asia now pay more attention to terrorism, especially after the Bali bombing and in light of the presence of terrorists in the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia.

17. (SBU) Vietnam supported the U.S.-initiated war against terrorism, one MFA participant confirmed, and had cooperated with the U.S. in maintaining terrorist watchlists as well as in monitoring possible assets and bank accounts of terrorist suspects. Vietnam had also established a counter-terrorism department in the Ministry of Public Security, noted one participant. However, Vietnam would not be supportive of the war on terrorism if it were a pretext to "wage other types of wars" or if the suspects were not "truly" terrorists, said a participant from the Prime Minister's Office.

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IRAQ, DPRK  
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18. (SBU) Participants asserted that Iraq is now a "rubbish bin" or a "fertile land" for other countries to "use freely." However, opinions were varied and heated regarding the Iraq war and the U.S. leadership of the war. Some opined that the U.S. went to war based on a "mistake," others that the real purpose was to capture Iraqi oil, and a few others that the war was justified, based on the cruelty of the Saddam regime and the potential threat to other states in the region. One MFA participant said that the U.S. and coalition troops should immediately leave Iraq. Another participant from VNA claimed that the U.S. had "always" wanted to control the oil resources in the Middle East and the Gulf, as in the 1991 Gulf War; the U.S. would "never" be able to keep its hands off this oil-rich area, he said.

19. (SBU) Others were more favorable on the war in Iraq. According to an MOI participant, the GVN did not support the Iraq war but did not "like" the Saddam Hussein dictatorship, either. The U.S. had assumed a "heavy" duty in resolving international issues like Iraq, and should remain in Iraq until order, stability, and security were restored and an interim government established, another said. Participants commented that if the U.S. did not intervene in the Middle East, the world would blame the U.S. for not taking the leading role. No other country but the U.S. was in a position to resolve an issue as complicated as Iraq, another participant argued.

10. (SBU) All participants agreed that the DPRK's acceptance of six-party talks in Beijing was a positive step. According to an MOD participant, the role of the U.S. and China in moving the talks forward was essential. Some participants argued that the U.S. should lift sanctions before the DPRK bowed to any further U.S. requests. Others felt the U.S. should pledge an aid package first before "demanding" anything from the DPRK. However, an MFA participant argued that the DPRK should allow UN inspectors in first before receiving assistance. He emphasized that Vietnam does not support the DPRK's possession of nuclear weapons and seeks a peaceful resolution to the issue.

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INTERNAL THREATS  
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11. (SBU) Participants agreed that drug trafficking and abuse were serious problems that cost Vietnam "tremendously in all aspects." A participant from the Ministry of Labor, Invalids, and Social Affairs noted that Vietnam now officially has 127,000 registered addicts (while the actual figure could be many times higher) and that the GVN spends approximately USD 400 per addict per year. Recidivism is found in ninety-nine percent of the addict population, he noted. (Note: these numbers track with those in the

International Narcotics Control Strategy Report for Vietnam -- refel. End note.) Most of the participants recommended enhancing international cooperation because the narcotics problem exceeds Vietnam's ability to confront it alone.

12. (SBU) An MOI participant called the fight against corruption in Vietnam "similar to repairing a collapsing house." In fact, "the entire house now needs replacing," and it cannot be done piece by piece, he admitted. Some participants pointed out that officials have low salaries and hence low living standards, making corruption "unavoidable" in many cases. According to another MOI participant, "many billions" of Vietnamese dong are lost due to corruption each year.

13. (SBU) Many participants agreed that international NGOs helped Vietnam's development, functioning as "bridges" between central and local authorities, helping the voices of the local people be heard, and enhancing grass-roots democracy. However, one participant claimed that some NGOs are engaged in long-term efforts to "destabilize" the country, using "assistance" to plan anti-government activities.

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ASEAN AND BURMA  
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14. (SBU) One MFA participant criticized the "ineffectiveness" of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), although he faced differing opinions on this from the rest of the class. ASEAN needs another "baby" to replace the "malfunctioning" ARF, he stated. Other participants advanced the opinion that ASEAN needed the current ARF mechanism for the sake of stability and order. Some opined that ASEAN should expel Burma since it does not abide by the basic principles of the organization. The group agreed that China, like the U.S., Russia, and Japan, was now a new source of external influence over ASEAN in general, and especially on Burma. This worried ASEAN members, including Vietnam, said participants. Others disagreed with expelling Burma, citing fears of the potential problems Burma could cause as a non-ASEAN member. According to an MFA participant, Burma was looking to China for assistance, which posed a challenge to ASEAN since Burma might act unexpectedly and could decide it did not need ASEAN. ASEAN needed to do whatever it could to try to keep Burma away from China's influence and help it integrate better into the organization, said an MFA participant.

15. (SBU) In the future, the major regional powers in Southeast Asia would include Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam, the participants speculated. According to a participant from Ho Chi Minh Political Academy, any of these three countries could have influence over Burma. This participant especially stressed the importance of using personal ties between the leaders of Burma and the leaders of these three countries. Vietnam should use its own personal channels to persuade Burma to open up and democratize if official channels prove ineffective, he urged. An MOI participant warned that, if Burma were expelled from ASEAN, a regional arms race could begin and China would then play a decisive role in determining Burma's future direction. ASEAN would find that it had "lost" Burma to China.

16. (SBU) According to a participant from the CPV's External Relations Commission, the U.S. has a vital role to play in changing the political regime in Burma. "Cornering" Burma is not a good idea, opined the participant. Poverty and underdevelopment are the root causes of totalitarianism and violations of human rights, continued the participant. Lifting economic sanctions could be the best way to help Burma become more prosperous, democratic, and responsible, and improve its human rights record, added the CPV official.

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COMMENT  
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17. (U) Opinions offered during the course were in general cautious, befitting the fact that no expression of political opinion would be truly anonymous, but many comments nonetheless were surprisingly frank and open. Conversation steered clear of examining the legitimacy of the existing power structure in Vietnam or the possibility of "peaceful evolution" as a positive development for Vietnam. The participants revealed a range of thinking that in some cases varied significantly from the official line. Their display of a degree of critical thinking indicates that the younger generation of Vietnamese officials, at least, is looking beyond doctrine and propaganda for answers to major questions on security.

BURGHARDT